

Post-Partum

By
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*...Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is neverending;*

T.S.Eliot from '**The Dry Salvages**'

Through the grainy gloom of pre-dawn, she stares at the stain on the ceiling. She traces the outline of the shape above her head, tries to work out whether it is diminishing or expanding. Damp? Watermark? Mould? She realises she's been staring at it every night since the baby came home. And that that was the last time she slept. Before the baby came home.

Sleep. A far-flung memory. Its narcotic wash, its drowsy stupor. How good it felt. How good she'd felt.

Tom, you awake?

He's sleeping. And yes, the baby is sleeping. There's a hush over the suburb. A blanket of black velvet. The crickets are asleep, the butcher-birds and the possums. The planet slumbers and the shadows of the night smoulder blue. She wonders if she

is the sole person awake in the cosmos. Wired, awake; it's the same every night, since the baby came home. A nocturnal Groundhog Day.

Thirteen weeks, but who's counting?

It's maybe three a.m. Or four or five. Dark enough to be three but slivers of wispy grey suggest later. Yes four perhaps, but not five. Too dark, too dense to be five. An oil slick. And she's the stranded gull, wings greased and blackened, unable to fly. Hostage.

Who would know the hour? The world has slowed ever so slightly; time is contrary, and clocks lie. She's scratchy tired, desperate to crash. But the stain is up there on the ceiling, like a CCTV camera. Watching her toss and turn; as she, in turn, watches it.

She knuckles her eyeballs, rubs the lids with the heel of her hand. Flicks on the bedside lamp and flips open *Parenting: Love and Logic*. Reads a page, re-reads it. The sentences don't compute. Letters, black on white, are corralled into words; the words string into sentences without making sense, they queue and bunch and pile up; sentence upon sentence, the meaning of their sequence obtuse and floating out of reach.

A deep ache vibrates behind her eyes. Bores into the back of her skull, drills like a jackhammer. She turns off the lamp and tries again to snooze. She rolls over, flips back, stares into the nothingness. The gift of sleeplessness. A tunnel of dead pain that's been there for weeks.

Can't sleep Tom, can't sleep. Tom? Are you awake?

All night long thoughts race, her mind an Olympic sprint final. Little fears jostle at the starting line, tiny worries that inflate into muscle-rippling champions of despair by the finishing post. And when the dark hours lighten, do they drift away?

No. They skulk in sunlight's shadows, holed up until the sun sets, race-fit for nightfall.

She strains to make out the splotch through the murky half-light. Her eyes are gritty and her vision shimmers, but sure enough, the stain is getting sharper. The black net of night is fading to gauze. The more she studies the stain, the more defined its edge. Like the rim of a dam that's fit to spill its banks, a levee primed to burst.

The muffled drum-beat of rain starts up, striking a gentle tattoo on the corrugated iron roof. It sounds like tears. The sprinkle of soft sobs. Under the quilt of darkness her eyes leak. No one sees. No one hears. Her man slumbers on, oblivious. Anaesthetised. Snoring like a sliding door slithering back and forth on its tracks. Up and back. Up and back.

After all, what is there to cry about? Nothing.

I have it all.

A healthy baby. A man to share her bed.

A career, in theory.

A house that's partly paid for.

Family who arrive at the door with folksy advice and lasagnes.

Friends.

Neighbours who pass honey drizzled-loukoumathes over the fence, who coo and cluck and knit tiny singlets in pastel lambswool.

A dog whose almond eyes watch and wonder, *what the hell's going on with her?*

Who spots her charade, who spies her unravelling.

No reason to cry, no reason at all. She has it all.

She hears the rat-a-tat of the rain and through the shadows, sees the stain radiating in the darkness. Spreading.

And now the rain is bucketing down. Big drops bouncing off the iron, like tennis balls being thrown from above. She stares upwards, speculating whether the roof is leaking, whether water is seeping in between the sheets of iron, whether it's trickling down the eaves, dripping into the insulation batts, saturating the plaster, whether the whole ceiling is ballooning with the weight of the water, billowing, distending.

She contemplates what might happen.

What could happen.

With the great weight of all that water.

And still it keeps raining, heavier now, and she pictures the old Victorian ceiling swelling like a giant sponge, bulging, bloating. Wonders if it might give way, sort of disintegrate without warning, fall in. A simple snap echoing in the bedroom's gamey air, a splintering that slivers the night, a cracking of plaster. A chink at first. A fracture, a fissure opening, a crumbling cloud of choking dust.

She imagines chunks of stucco falling from a great height. On her, and only her. Missing her man, her Tom, who'll slumber on, oblivious, snoring like an old sliding door gliding rhythmic on its tracks. Back and forth. Back and forth.

And she sort of welcomes that thought. The stucco, loosening. She likes it. It works.

She stays with that thought - twists and twirls it in her mind. Allows it to slowly heat; turns up the flame. Lets the thought boil and bubble and spit. This could

be the answer, she thinks, this could work. The idea percolates. She wouldn't have to go through this. The listless emptying of hours; day into night, night into day.

If I were to slip away, say it

... if I were dead

She could sleep, she could catch up. The night would no longer stalk her. Or the baby dozing in the bassinet who sucks the life out of her, who drains her beatifically, adoringly. Who knows his mother is disintegrating, and yet beams and gurgles all the same.

And it would be a virtuous death because it would be an accident, a catastrophic accident. An old house, a faulty roof, an unstable ceiling. Who would have thought? Let that be a lesson to you all, go get your house checked, your gutters, the wiring; check the lot, pay a professional. And don't delay, who knows what lurks within your roof. Who knows?

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And there would be a funeral. People would flock, as they do when the natural order is tilted, when the old bury the young. The generations would gather in the vaulted chapel to mourn the loss of the young mother.

Only the good die young.

Hail Mary, and pull up a pew. Inhale the incense, sprinkle the holy water. Remember her with kind words and stirring hymns, with psalms and prayers and poetry that courses through the veins as life once did in this mother, partner, daughter,

sister. Some Larkin, a little Rumi, a verse or two of Rossetti. Some Akhmatova, why not?

There would be music too. Leonard Cohen breathing *Hallelujah*? Coldplay? Jay-Z rapping *Forever Young* while photographs of a sweet short life cascade in a collage, one after the other. While images flicker and fade on a plasma screen.

Shots in a wading pool. At a music festival. In a graduation gown...

Her life. *My life.*

[Freeze the frame. There. Pale and wan in a hospital smock, holding the newborn babe out to the camera, her own flesh and blood, *Someone, please, take it!*]

A white hearse waiting at the steps of the cathedral, white balloons in bunches blotting out the blue as they rise, white doves – just a couple.

Alleluia. Alleluia.

And in the misplaced days that follow, all will rally around the motherless babe, and the fresh-faced widower who everybody loves. *Tom.* And they'll wheel the baby around the block in his pram, and bring him fluffy bears and designer teething rings. They'll offer to babysit. They'll arrive with tuna mornay in pyrex and tubs of bolognaisse sauce and carrot cakes with cream-cheese frosting. There'll be too many cakes.

A tide of helpers will sweep in like a full-moon tide, and then recede. The community crews, the family feeders, the death squad do-gooders. And her absence filled, the memory of the young mother will recede too. For nature abhors a vacuum.

They will do a better job than I ever could, she tells herself.

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Strange how the numb pre-dawn, turns a mind to solutions. The idea has promise – a pathos, an appealing melodrama. She listens to the patter of the rain on the roof and mulls over the unimaginable. The hairline cracks on the bedroom ceiling radiate like the spidery veins in her bloodshot eyes. She watches the stain expand. She wills the ceiling to cave in, prays it will collapse on her, bids it to fall. She commands it.

Now.

This is what she thinks.

Ad infinitum, nightly, on the graveyard shift.

This is how it is.

It's like something has come adrift. No one must know it's her. A rip has dragged her far from shore. A greening wave slams her ragdoll body into the sea-bed, motherhood traps her under a broiling surf fighting for air. Spindrift floats, foam flicked by the wind - and the pathetic creature she believes she has become, survives another night.

Where is the careless oblivion of pregnancy? Of childlessness?

The black dog dips his paw in paint and daubs her life in blues and blacks and muted greys.

Yet I'm lucky, she tells herself, and tries to believe. Everybody says so.

So how traitorous? She forgets when she last fed the baby; was it two hours or four? She waivers whether to bathe him or not, because the task seems overwhelming. This child who never asked to be born, who demands so little.

I should be grateful.

She forgets to cook, to eat, to shower. She's good for nothing. The madness and melancholia, the muted hysteria; it's hers alone. She conspires to hide it; she puts on a brave face. Nobody knows.

But if they knew – then what?

But no one does.

My futureless future.

The Madonna with the lunatic gleam wears a mask.

*

A wedge of sallow yellow slinks through the gap where the curtains don't meet. The mesh of night is threadbare. The ceiling will not fall tonight, or ever. She accepts this. She's drifting towards a new day, out beyond the break. A gull, floating on the surface, who has forgotten how to fly.

The rain has stopped. A magpie warbles, a car coughs into life, a rubbish truck revs then peters out as it stalls and starts again on its bin-lined odyssey. A wafer moon recedes, pale and ashen. It will be light soon and the baby will wake for a feed, and Tom for work.

Another day, another endless night.

Something has to change.

Enough is enough.

It's as if a lamp that's been switched off, flickers on. Dim at first but soft and golden, nonetheless. She looks up, eyes of fire-opal. It's clearer than before. The ceiling has sagged, and the oval shape of the stain is hooked at one end like a question mark. What is the question?

She's too tired now, too tired to think. Like she's had an anaesthetic she never asked for.

She doesn't know what the question is.

But she knows the answer.

It's her. Or it's the baby.

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